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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: WAR OF WORDS WITH SYRIA

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Tensions are higher than usual between Israel and Syria this week following an exchange of comments on the possible outbreak of war. A February 1 comment by Defense Minister Barak to the effect that the alternative to opening negotiations with Syria could be the outbreak of war was intended to signal to an Israeli audience Barak's sense of urgency over resuming negotiations, but it appears to have come across to the Syrian leadership as a threat. The Syrians responded, with President Asad saying that Israel is seeking war, not peace, while Foreign Minister Muallem commented publically that a war would include attacks on Israeli cities. Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman raised the ante February 4, saying that a Syrian attack on Israel would lead to the destruction of the Syrian regime, leading opposition MK Mofaz to call for Israeli leaders to avoid inflammatory rhetoric. DAO reports no sign of unusual IDF military activity in the north. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Tensions with Syria burst into a war of words February 3-4. After weeks of top-level Israeli complaints behind closed doors that Syria is expanding its military cooperation with Hizballah, Defense Minister Barak was widely quoted February 1 as having told a group of senior IDF officers that "in the absence of an arrangement with Syria, we are liable to enter a belligerent clash with it that could reach the point of an all-out regional war." Barak went on to say that after such a war, Israel would sit down with Syria and be faced with negotiating the same issues that have been on the agenda for the past 15 years.

¶3. (SBU) While to an Israeli audience, Barak's comments were clearly meant to underscore the importance he attaches to engaging Syria diplomatically rather than risk a slide toward war, the Syrian leadership appears to have interpreted Barak's remarks as a threat. During a February 3 visit to Damascus by Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos, President Asad was quoted in the Israeli press as saying, "Israel is not serious about achieving peace, since all the facts show that she is pushing the region toward war, not peace." Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem took the point further, and was quoted in the Israeli press as saying that Israel was planting the seeds of war by threatening attacks on Iran, Lebanon and Gaza. Ha'aretz quoted Muallem as saying, "I tell them (the Israelis) to stop acting like thugs. Do not test the resolve of Syria. You Israelis, you know that war at this time will reach your cities. If such a war breaks out...it will indeed be total war, whether it begins in South Lebanon or Syria." (Note: The latest furor follows a January 23 intervention by Netanyahu to assure Lebanon that Israel has no intention of attacking it following an earlier statement by Minister without Portfolio Yossi Peled said publically that war with Lebanon was inevitable due to Hizballah's build-up of rockets with Syrian support.)

¶4. (SBU) On February 4, Foreign Minister Lieberman responded by threatening the survival of the Asad regime. Speaking at

a conference at Bar Ilan University, Lieberman was reported to have said, "Asad should know that if he attacks, he will not only lose the war, neither he nor his family will remain in power." Lieberman went on to say, "Our message should be that if Asad's father lost a war but remained in power, the son should know that an attack would cost him his regime." The Prime Minister's office has not yet commented on Lieberman's remarks, but the opposition Kadima party's number two member, Shaul Mofaz, complained to Israel Radio that Israeli leaders must not play into Iran's hands by making "inflammatory" statements. Mofaz added that Israel's leadership "must be very responsible, very restrained, and level headed about what it says."

15. (C) Comment: We are convinced that Barak's remarks were in fact meant to convey his sense of urgency about resuming negotiations with Syria, but the Syrian response and now Lieberman's characteristically bombastic threat against the Asad family have genuinely raised tensions. According to DAO, quiet prevails in the north and there are no indications of unusual Israeli military preparations, but the situation is tense.
Cunningham